

Giving Birth to Justice
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Beacon UU Congregation

If you are a PBS fan, then you may be familiar with what has become the one of the most popular import from the BBC – the unlikely phenomenon entitled “Call The Midwife.” (Do you know it?)! The plot follows newly qualified midwife Jenny Lee and the work of midwives and the nuns of Nonnatus House, a nursing convent, coping with the medical problems in a deprived area of East London in the 1950s. The story lines are gritty and sometimes quite heart-rending.

For instance, the episode featuring Mrs Conchita Warren, during her 23rd pregnancy, or the one that features Pearl, whose indomitable spirit rises above a dose of venereal disease; and Muriel, whose home delivery shows us the best and worst that the system has to offer. Or, the one about Mary, the 15 year old Irish runaway from an abusive home, who is forced into prostitution. And then there’s episode four, in which Margaret, a young musician, cannot afford proper prenatal care and dies of eclampsia during childbirth. Let’s just say – Downton Abbey it is NOT! Throughout the series, we are witness to examples of what the nuns of Nonnantus seem to understand compassionately about the need for Reproductive Justice.

First, the sisters (Julienne, Evangelina, Bernadette and Monica Joan) recognize that no health issue exists in isolation. Sexual activity, pregnancy, and childbirth, planned or unplanned, usher in a series of health concerns and decisions within the social context of a woman’s life. That’s why many health activists for women of color, prefer the framework of reproductive justice to reproductive rights. As The Sister Song Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective puts it this way:

“One of the key problems addressed by Reproductive Justice is the isolation of abortion or birth control from other social justice issues that concern communities of color: issues of economic justice, the environment, immigrants’ rights, disability rights, discrimination based on race and sexual orientation, and a host of other community-centered concerns. These issues directly affect an individual woman’s decision-making process.”

Wouldn’t it be great if political discussions about reproductive health started from a place that considered social context? But, often, they do not. This is why we are taking up the issue and striving to become effective midwives ourselves for the birthing of justice. Sister Julienne is an especially good role model for our congregation as we engage with this issue. She knows how to pray, sing and devote herself to her beliefs; but she also knows when to show compassion, establish boundaries, and step back when needed. She uses her energy to nurse the sick, not to function as a member of the morality brigade. In this case, religious beliefs are a

foundation for action rather than rhetoric.

Call The Midwife touches on accurate sexual education, voluntary choice in family formation, and even addresses the right to find and choose your own life partner, a commonly unacknowledged reproductive right. Think about it – do you feel privileged because you can choose how many children to have or not have, or whether to marry or not marry?

If you were a woman without the ability to make these choices (someone like Conchita Warren, with her 22 previous pregnancies and no autonomy over her body) you'd be likely to think so. Martin Luther King himself had remarked that of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane. We may be in Flagstaff (circa 2022 and in a liberal church) and not the London of the 1950's (in a Catholic convent) , but these issues ring true, nonetheless, and inform our need to organize for what we believe in as activists and agents of change.

I studied community organizing in graduate school, and remember reading Taylor Branch's Parting the Waters, a chronicle of America during the years of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement. I recall being inspired by a palpable realization of what people – flawed, funny, angry, compassionate humans, can do when we organize.

One thing I've learned about the Civil Rights movement, germane to our topic this morning, is that much of the organizing that occurred then had more to do with women and poor people and even gay people than most tellings of the history. Likewise, reproductive justice is not merely a women's issue..it is a human issue that calls us all, male, female, or non-binary, gay and straight, young and old, to action together.

What we cannot know alone – that we are not the only one who feels powerless - we can know in community; What we cannot do alone, such as ask for proper medical care, we can dare to demand within community; What we cannot overcome alone, such as systemic racism or infringement on reproductive choice, we can challenge as a community of conscience. Marge Piercy, a noted early feminist provides a rallying cry for solidarity in her poem The Low Road – Alone, you can fight, you can refuse, but they roll over you; two people can keep each other sane, three people are a delegation, a wedge; with four, you can start an organization; with six, eat pie with no seconds, a dozen make a demonstration, a hundred fill a hall, a thousand have solidarity, ten million your own country.

We are not ten million here at Beacon, we're around 100, all told with our friends included. We are able to fill this Sanctuary, we have our own newsletter, we hold fundraising events and eat pie. As active members of the Social Justice Allies we engage in important social issues in our city, as participants in UU Justice Arizona, we press policy makers to implement laws that are just and humane. Did you know members of our congregation have traveled to Phoenix to witness for our values?

According to research I've conducted this past week on the issue of reproductive justice, the religious right has had many years to polish their rhetoric about topics such as sex education and abortion, and a liberal voice (especially the voice and presence of liberal clergy) is needed to correct false information and to

offer an counter-perspective.

Liz Perkins, a member at First Unitarian in Pittsburgh and part of the Women's Law Project, tells me they are hoping to have impact on a proposed bill banning abortion coverage within the Affordable Care Act. Their goal is to help legislators understand this issue as one of a woman's overall health, not just abortion

Another important issue is the welfare family cap bill, which punishes poor women for having more children by not giving them an increase in cash assistance when a new child is born; that is, unless the pregnancy is the result of a "legitimate" rape. Just the phrase "legitimate rape" speaks volumes about the realities and challenges of reproductive justice, and the powerless women can feel.

In some states now (Texas, most prominently) Abortion is nearly impossible to obtain, it is legal to report someone whom you suspect of having an abortion or even, a miscarriage. Women travel 100s of miles to Kansas or Oklahoma for reproductive services. As we know, Planned Parenthood has been under attack from the far right and their buildings are under armed guard.

As I've been learning more about these challenges and realities, one of the more shocking practices I've encountered is the shackling of pregnant inmates during labor. 33 states still allow this practice, although I cannot imagine any woman having the wherewithal to flee between contractions.

In my view, it is barbaric and an appalling abuse of power. Back in 2009, the NYT recounted the dehumanizing experience of Ms Tina Torres, a Puerto Rican woman, who spent over 17 hours shackled during labor. Torres says, "I could never have prepared myself for that. Even animals in captivity don't have to give birth in chains."

Not unlike the midwives of London's fictional Nonantus House, Torres was attended by Danielle Williams, one of three trained doulas (or birth facilitators) who staff MOMmobile, a groundbreaking program that assists disadvantaged women, incarcerated women, abused women, any woman who needs them in order to safely give birth. Some states have passed "Healthy Birth for Incarcerated Women Acts" which ban this practice. However, the law is not absolute and continues to permit shackling in early stages of pregnancy. It further requires some transparency in the form of reporting cases of shackling and why it was enforced. The thing about legislation is that even though the law has changed, bringing about full implementation of the law takes time, and organizations and activists to act as watchdogs and continue to persuade legislators to exert pressure and effect lasting change.

This year, SCOTUS will decide a case that could determine Roe's future. They will hear a number of challenges. The Women's Health Protection Act is our best chance to codify Roe and expand abortion access before it's too late, but it's stuck in the Senate. At the state level, here in Arizona, all three branches of government are anti-choice. Abortions are outlawed after 20 weeks, with few exceptions. Abortion providers must comply with uniquely restrictive guidelines with severe penalties for breaking them. Arizona allows unannounced inspections of abortion clinics, Doctors must have admitting privileges to a hospital within 30 miles but the hospital does not need to grant access. Scary prospect in an emergency, isn't it? There are so many provisions to the state law that it goes on for pages.

I'm asking you this morning to join the midwife brigade on the issue of reproductive justice. Not just to take giant steps to change the world out there, but also to walk together to change the world right here – within our community.

The Reverend Jeffrey Krehbiel, a veteran organizer in communities of faith in Washington, DC is bold enough to state that “Community organizing offers the best hope not only for the renewal of American democracy, but for the renewal of the church itself.” Organizing for change within a congregation, he tells us, can impact membership growth and stewardship by giving members a sense of purpose in society.

And in a relationally-based organizing culture, instead of just hoping for change or expecting to be told what needs to be changed, we intentionally give birth to justice by building connections both within our church family *and* outside of our comfort zones. The venerable Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Han, who died Friday at age 95 says something so simple but true – “Our actions are our only true belongings.”

Action will involve some labor pains. [The Rev. Joe Cherry writes that] “If we have any hope of transforming the world and changing ourselves, we must be bold enough to step into our discomfort, brave enough to be clumsy there, and loving enough to forgive ourselves and others.”

As Marge Piercy reminds us:

It goes on one at a time,

It starts when you care

to act, it starts when you do

it again after they said no,

it starts when you say We

and know who you mean,

and each day you mean one more.

I'm not asking for giant steps from you. I'm asking that we channel the spirit of Sister Julienne from the East End of London to the East Side of Flagstaff; that we take one courageous and compassionate step, and be the “one more” by joining with other UUs, interfaith allies, with legislators, and with organizations like Planned Parenthood and NARAL ProChoice America on the Jericho Road to reproductive justice.

Our former President, Barack Obama, a community organizer himself, and whose election is credited to some extent to the power of grassroots community efforts, has said, “Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.”

So, be the change. Be the “one more giving birth to justice.” Blessed be. Blessed we. Amen.

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